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REPLY

OF

JOHN W. WRIGHT,

Attorney for the Cherokee and Creek Indians,

TO

CERTAIN LIBELOUS STATEMENTS

PUBLISHED IN

The New York Tribune,

AND IN A

CERTAIN PAMPHLET SIGNED BY JAMES G. BLUNT.



WASHINGTON:
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TO THE PUBLIC.

The New York *Tribune* of April 30th and May 1st, published statements, in effect, that I had received from the Government over \$300,000 on account of Indian soldiers' back pay and bounty, only about \$60,000 of which had ever been received by the rightful owners—the balance, some \$240,000, being fraudulently withheld and deposited with Messrs. Jay Cooke & Co.

The substance of these libelous statements went the rounds of the press with sundry variations, to all of which I made the following reply, which was printed in full in several papers and an abstract sent through the Associated Press :

“TO THE PUBLIC.

“There have been several statements recently pulished in the newspapers in relation to alleged frauds practised upon Cherokee and other Indians in the matter of bounty payments. Justice to myself—the only attorney who has collected Indian bounties—requires that I should make the following statement :

“In May, 1865, the Indian regiments were mustered out of service, and bounty refused mainly on the ground that they were recruited for local service only. The Indian Delegations in Washington employed me to collect this bounty at \$15 per head. The claims had then been rejected by the Departments. Finally, by an act of Congress, Indian soldiers were placed upon the same footing in regard to bounty, &c., as all others. *Their first* bounty was then paid me in cash, *and all* the money I received was paid directly to the individual Indians entitled to it, in cash.

“About 750 of the Indians, many of them of the best character of soldiers, were borne on muster-rolls as deserters. Of course none of them were entitled to bounty under the law governing such cases. The agents of the “*Indian Ring*” inform these Indians that I have their bounty, and am withholding it, in order to create dissatisfaction and gain an influence for the furtherance of their own ends.

“*The books of the Paymaster General will show for whom I have collected bounties ; and for any one that I have collected and withheld, I will pay sevenfold.*

“As to the *second* bounties, I collected them after obtaining three opinions of the Attorney General in my favor. Drafts were issued by the Government in the name of the soldier, and I could not use a dollar without their endorsement. If that was forged, it is easy to discover and punish the forger. I have sent to the Indian country, to the soldiers, on their order, about fifty thousand dollars of these drafts, and the balance is being transmitted, so that the Indians will get the entire amount due them.

“No complaint would have been made if these drafts had been delivered to the U. S. agents or the members of the “Indian Ring,” but whether in this case the Indians would have SEEN their money is extremely doubtful.

“All the rumors about frauds, &c., are the work of the regular Indian Ring, who, finding their power obtained under the late Administration quite gone, seek to put on an honest face and gain favor with the powers that be.

“JOHN W. WRIGHT.

“WASHINGTON, *May* 3, A. D. 1869.”

“I do hereby certify that I am a delegate of the Cherokee Nation now in this city ; that I aided Judge Wright in making out the claims of the Indian soldiers ; that I

have read the above statement, and I know the facts therein set forth are true.

“H. D. REESE,

“*Chairman of Cherokee Delegation.*”

On the 9th of May I left Washington on my fifth annual visit to the Indian country, and returned on the 21st of June. During my absence the members of the Indian ring were by no means idle, a libelous pamphlet was issued by Gen. Blunt, and the *New York Tribune* on the 3d of July returns to the business, by publishing the following libelous despatch and editorial:

[BY TELEGRAPH TO THE TRIBUNE.]

“WASHINGTON, *Friday, July 2, 1869.*

“Gen. James G. Blunt of Kansas, acting as attorney for the survivors of a Creek Indian regiment, one of those formerly under his command, has just issued here, in pamphlet form, a report, addressed to his clients, of an investigation he has been making relative to alleged frauds in the collection of back pay, bounties, and pensions due them. The claim agent, whose alleged corruption he examined, is Judge J. W. Wright, formerly of Indiana. Rumors of these frauds were furnished you some months since. Gen. Blunt's pamphlet seems to have been carefully prepared, and, in its deductions, claims to be borne out by sworn statements on file in the Interior Department, certified copies of which are published. It appears that Mr. Wright had authority to collect these claims from Secretary Harlan, who, to protect the Indians, caused Wright to execute a bond in the penal sum of \$100,000, in which he was joined by his sons, and D. P. Holloway, John D. Defrees, and Thomas Ewing, Jr. By this bond, Wright was enjoined to pay over to the Indians all moneys received by him, within three months, or deposit the same with the Interior Department. According to Gen. Blunt, the Judge has done neither. The former charges that large amounts of these claims have been long withheld, and more than intimates that a great many of the claimants, whose money Wright has received, have never been paid. To test this, he prints a certified copy of payment made to Wright by Paymasters Gibson and Holmes, which the Indians are asked to examine. He charges, further, that Wright has, by delay, discredited the Government, and caused the Indians to sell their claims at heavy discounts to traders, with whom the Agent is alleged to be in collusion. The case presented by Gen. Blunt demands an investigation.

and it is intended to bring it before Congress, if the Interior Department does not examine into it. Copies of the pamphlet are to be sent to all the heads of Departments, and to the press generally. The amount known to be received by Wright is stated by Gen. Blunt, from official papers, to be \$300,401.12, and these figures do not cover all of the claims. The Cherokee delegation, now here, have also made a demand upon the Indian Bureau for an investigation of these alleged frauds. They had two regiments in the loyal Indian brigade."

The editorial published in the same number of the *Tribune* is as follows:

"The Judge Wright, who has suddenly attained an unpleasant notoriety through the charges of Gen. Blunt concerning alleged claim-agency corruptions, is a former railroad manager in Northern Indiana. There have been charges before against his official conduct, and it has long been doubted whether he was entirely the person to be intrusted with large pecuniary responsibilities by the Government."

The chief Washington Correspondent of the New York *Tribune* is a member of the Young family, one of whom is said to have made himself somewhat notorious by tampering with the Associated Press despatches, and one of his assistants is said to have been the author of the false charges of fraud against United States officials in the Alaska purchase. I suppose the Chief Correspondent and his assistant are both on the make, and are paid to control the *Tribune* in the interest of the Indian ring. Certainly no men would be guilty of such unblushing falsehoods without pay.

The *Tribune* styles this Blunt as "acting attorney for the survivors of a Creek Indian regiment." That is false, as are all other *Tribune* statements in regard to this matter. Blunt's power of attorney is signed by only three persons, neither one of whom was ever a soldier, unless it may have been in the rebel army. My power of attorney is signed by over two thousand Union soldiers.

The shortest and best reply, however, that can be made to the *Tribune's* charges and to Blunt's pamphlet therein

mentioned, is to give a brief history of my business with the Indian regiments. Here it is:

Just before the close of the war the Hon. John Ross and Rev. Evan Jones, then delegates of the Cherokee Nation, requested me to visit their country and make out and assort the claims of their people against the United States for services, &c., during the war, and we agreed on a compensation therefor. In July, A. D. 1865, I visited the Indian country, and found not only claims for horses and cattle stolen by the military and civil officers of the United States to the amount of millions of dollars, but the Indians who had served the United States faithfully had been mustered out without any bounty, as they were neither white men or negroes, and the law using the word volunteers did not include Indians. These regiments were commanded by white men, and in each company was one white officer, and I found some of these men endeavoring to purchase the Indian officers' pay-roll at \$100 each, and the privates' discharges at from \$5 to \$10 each. The first regiment was principally Creeks; all of the officers, except one or two, sold their pay-roll at from \$100 to to \$110 each; the Cherokees refused to sell, and I collected and paid to them from six to seven hundred dollars each on the same papers that the others obtained only \$100. In the Paymaster General's Office can now be seen the receipts of these Creek officers each for about \$700, and evidence filed by me that the only amount paid them was from \$100 to \$110 each.

I took the discharge and a regular power of attorney from each soldier to collect his bounty at 15 per cent., and returned to Washington where I found one of the men, whom I saw at Fort Gibson endeavoring to purchase the Indian discharges for \$5 each, as a *high* clerk in the War Department, and as soon as I made my case known it

was promptly decided against me : 1st, on the ground that Indians were not white or black ; and 2d, that they were raised for a local and not a general service. After a delay of near a year, Congress passed an act to pay Indians as other troops. I drew the money I was entitled to draw, and went out and paid the Indian private soldiers his money, *eighty-five* dollars each in cash, and nothing else ; and in the first regiment every person except three came forward to demand and receive their money.

As to the two other regiments, they being Cherokees and not in controversy, I will not allude to them particularly. I might here say that in the fall of A. D. 1865, Blunt appeared before the Cherokee National Council, made a speech of an hour abusing me, and the only effect of it was to make them adhere to me.

In June, 1866, an extra bounty law was passed. I again visited the Indian country, and procured the power of attorney from each Indian officer and soldier to collect that bounty. It was as summarily refused as the first, and on the same grounds. I awaited the progress of events, and when General Grant became Secretary of War he referred my claim to the Attorney General, and he decided in my favor. Before any action was taken, Secretary Stanton returned to office, and during his *reign* I was silent. On Gen. Schofield taking the War office I again pressed the claim, produced the opinion of Attorney General Stansberry, and he refused to accept it as law, and referred it twice to Attorney General Evarts, with a private argument against it, and still the Attorney General adhered to the former opinion, and Gen. Schofield ordered its payment in drafts to the Indians.

These drafts I commenced to receive the 30th of October, A. D. 1868, and extending to the present time ;

and in May last I went to the Indian country and paid to each Indian his draft—collecting my fees.

I was three weeks with them without arms or a guard, and was treated with the utmost kindness and respect, and although these people are a Christian and civilized people, I doubt much if Blunt could remain there as many days without a United States guard and return with his scalp. Now as to other matters in the *Tribune's* statement and Blunt's pamphlet. I was not appointed by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs or the Secretary of the Interior; nor am I in any sense a United States officer. I am the attorney selected by the Indians to collect and disburse the amounts due them from the United States. After I commenced my collections the Indian Bureau, true to its instincts, got the smell of cash and asserted the right to receive and disburse the money, they paying my fees: and rather than contend with that concern and the *ring* that owned and run it, I consented to pay the money to them for disbursement, and in 1865 I paid them about \$20,000, not a cent of which was paid for a year to the claimants, and a large portion of which is not paid to this day. I soon found that my clients were no better off by my services, in collecting money from the Treasury to sink it in the Indian Bureau, and I therefore declined to pay them any more, (preferring to pay direct to the soldier) and took the opinion of the Hon. Thos. Ewing, Sr., of Ohio, on the subject, which is filed in the Indian Office.

Mr. Ewing held that the Indian Bureau had nothing to do with me, as the attorney to collect the bounty of the Indian regiments. That I was acting for them as soldiers and not as Indians. That payments made by me in the Indian Office would not relieve me from responsibility to my clients, and that the money I had paid I ought to demand of the Commissioner of Indian

Affairs, and if not refunded bring suit and to recover the sum.

When the Indian ring and their abettors found that I would pay into their treasury no more funds, they began their howl and have continued it to the present time.

Since my first connection with Indian affairs, I have visited the Indian country once a year, and often sent money in the interval, and paid all demands in cash or United States drafts, and nothing else direct to the soldier entitled to it, excepting the \$20,000 I was forced to pay over to the Indian Bureau and its agent.

In A. D. 1867 the cholera was prevailing very bad, and the Indians would not come to Fort Gibson for their money, and I made out a list of the money coming to the 1st regiment, (Creeks,) and paid into the hands of the United States Indian agent \$19,783.20 to pay them. How it was paid I do not know. Some Indians have since complained to me of the manner of payment, and Blunt has a statement that this agent said I had returned with all the money except \$4,000, and if they desired their pay they must take it in goods. If I did wrong in any thing it was in paying the Indian Bureau or the United States Indian agent any part of this money. As to the first bounty—every person in the 1st regiment except three have long since been paid, and those three have not demanded their money; as to the second bounty, it was issued in drafts and I could not use them had I been so disposed, and almost all of them are delivered to the proper persons, and all will be as soon as demanded.

As to the collections I have made they amount to a large sum, much larger than Blunt charges. I collected to-day for an Indian some thousand dollars for hides

sent to an Eastern market. Has the Indian Bureau or Blunt any right to inquire into it?

Now what right has Blunt to inquire into the matters about the 1st regiment.

He sets out a power of attorney signed by three persons, who say they were delegated to inquire into my doings. One of them claims to be Chief. Neither one of them were soldiers.

Why did not these persons or these attorneys inquire of me about matters? It was not done, and the reason was they knew they had no authority so to do; and on my late visit to the Indian country I never heard their names mentioned among the 10,000 of Indians.

I have power of attorney from each soldier, many of them executed after Blunt's bogus authority. One cause of complaint the Indian soldiers had was the delay in procuring their money: they had honestly served the United States, and they could not understand the obstinacy and delay of Secretary Stanton. The white officers had most unjustifiably marked the three regiments, 751 of these soldiers as deserters, for whom I have not yet been able to collect any bounty: who were good soldiers and often were absent from roll call only once, and then with consent of their Indian officers. These men have been told that I have their bounty and that has produced some dissatisfaction, and as also the conduct of the United States Indian officers as aforesaid.

Blunt wishes an investigation by the Secretary of the Interior or he will demand one of Congress.

I have no objection to an investigation provided it applies to Blunt as well as myself. I may suggest that Blunt's connection with the Choctaw claim had better be inquired into.

The Choctaw treaty of A. D. 1866 stipulated to pay the loyal Choctaws their damages during the war.

They were so very few that I supposed \$10,000 would cover the entire amount. A commission was appointed and Blunt is attorney for the loyal Choctaws, and award is made for about \$300,000.

This report is reviewed by J. H. Latrobe, Esq., of Baltimore, and its rascality completely shown, as will be seen in the Indian office. The Secretary of Interior refused to pay it. After a part of the Indian Choctaw delegation were bribed, and perhaps others, Congress made an appropriation to pay \$259,742.08—under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior. This law is very guarded in its terms. Congress intended to make it impossible for “attorneys” like Blunt to plunder the Indians. One clause provided that—

“No contract or power of attorney shall have any validity unless signed and executed after the passage of this act, and no payments shall be made or bonds delivered under the provisions of this act, except to the persons actually entitled in his own right to receive the same.”

As soon as this act was passed a special agent was appointed to go and make the payment, and a clerk to attest the same. Let inquiry be made as to how much this special agent was paid by the United States and how much by General Blunt. Let the inquiry then extend to see how much Blunt retained for his fees and how much the poor Indian received. Attorney’s fees are said to have been 73 per cent., and the clients’ dividend 27 per cent. Let this matter be sifted—and let inquiry be made why claimants were sent to meet the Special Agent in the Cherokee Nation. Was it fear of the Choctaws that cut short their journey, or was it easier to collect fees where the client was far from home?

As to the amount Blunt received, I can refer to Hon.

Mr. Brodhead, 2d Comptroller of the Treasury, who had it from the mouth of the Special Agent that Blunt's received \$100,000.

But why is it that Blunt and the *Tribune* correspondent are after me? Are they so pure they can volunteer in the defense of my clients? Blunt has money, and the *Tribune* correspondent is no doubt willing to divide with him. Yet Blunt has a different motive. During the war, Gen. Herron, Gen. Marcy, and Col. Sinclair, of the United States Army, visited the Indian country, and made reports that a large majority of the military and civil officers of the Government had combined to rob the Indians and the United States, and that the robberies were carried on with a high hand and outstretched arm.

In the report of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, A. D., 1865, pages 32-and-253, is the following statement:

“At the period of the last annual report from this office, affairs in this superintendency, comprising what is known as the “Indian country,” south of Kansas, together with the Osages along the southern border of that State, were still in the confused and discouraging condition which necessarily resulted from the war. Portions of the country about Forts Gibson and Smith, and the travelled route for government trains from the north to those posts, were held by United States troops: and a portion of the Indians, who had remained loyal to the Government, were attempting to subsist themselves in the neighborhood of the above forts. Many of the able-bodied men of the loyal sections of the tribes were in the United service as soldiers, but many thousands of the people were, in Kansas and portions of the Indian country, subsisted at the expense of the funds which, if the tribes had remained steadfast to the Union, would have gone to them as annuities. Serious complaints were being made to the Department that stock owned by Indians, and necessary for their subsistence, and the small crops of corn raised by those who had been able to till the ground, were being taken from them by unprincipled speculators. The information obtained by Superintendent Sells, as given in his report, furnishes some idea of the enormous extent as well as profit of the business, where *contractors obtain ready sale for the plunder at such rates as they have received from the government.*

“In confirmation of the estimate made by the Superintendent as to the extent of this traffic, the position and influence, civil and military, of the persons engaged in it, the difficulty of preventing its continuance and of punishing its operators, I here subjoin brief extracts from a report which has just been received from Lieutenant George Williams, who was some time since detailed by the War Department to investigate these matters, under instructions from this office.

“After alluding to the large number of persons who have made independent fortunes in the business, he says:

“Not content with having this odium attached to their own names, having carried it on so successfully and without interruption from those in authority, who knew of the whole transaction in this line, but who were too deeply interested themselves to try any measures to put a stop to it, they have induced men by the hundred to go down into the Indian territory to steal and drive out cattle,’ &c.

“Again: ‘The military force sent into this State for the protection of these Indians have been the agents through whom a great portion of the stealing has been accomplished,’ &c.

“After giving the names of some thirty or forty prominent men, merchants, military officers, Indian agents, traders, and others, whom he charges directly with being implicated in this traffic in one way or another, Lieutenant Williams says:

“The above-mentioned parties and their allies, the cattle thieves, have been engaged in the business since 1862, and I have evidence against most of them in my possession, but there is scarcely if any use to attempt to prosecute them before any court in Kansas, because they openly make their boasts that they can buy men enough to swear anything they want them to, and I know they speak the truth from experience.’

“As to the extent of the business: ‘In my opinion, during the past four years there have been at least 300,000 head of cattle stolen from the Indian territory, a country at one time rich in their cattle possessions, and now scarcely a head can be seen in a ride of 200 miles.’”

* * * * *

“It is utterly impossible to effectually break up this system of plunder from the Indians as long as the State, civil, and military authorities are in sympathy with the parties engaged.

“I think it is not doing violence to truth to say that since the commencement of the rebellion three hundred thousand head of cattle have been driven from the Indian country without the consent of the owners and without remuneration, which, at an average value of fifteen dollars per head, will amount to the enormous sum of four million five hundred thousand dollars.”

I am now about through with the Indian back-pay bounty business; and, as the United States guaranteed protection to these people, I am about asserting their claim, before Congress, for indemnity for losses during the rebellion. Many of the officers, civil and military, will figure as cattle thieves before I get done with the case. Gen. Blunt was in command, and controlled both civil and military affairs in the Indian country a large portion of the time during the rebellion. His record has not yet been written. The public will soon have an opportunity of seeing how it looks.

J. W. WRIGHT.

WASHINGTON, *July* 14, 1869.



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